

Stress on the Farm: Strategies that Help

Key Points

1. We know farming is dangerous. Farming ranks among the most hazardous of professions.
2. Farmers also have the highest mortality rate from stress related illnesses. Individuals working in the farming, fishing, and forestry group also have one of the highest rates of suicide as compared with other professions. This is primarily due to stressors, such as job-related isolation, stressful work environments, and work-home imbalance. More importantly, stress is caused by those conditions beyond the farmer's control, such as weather, fluctuating commodity prices, variable crop yield, and machinery breakdowns.
3. Stress is simply a response to a threatening event, such as receiving some type of bad news. Unfortunately, our brain and body do not know the difference between being threatened by a saber-toothed tiger, being late for work, or having a machinery breakdown during harvest. Our brain and body still respond by being prepared to either jump into a fight or run away quickly.
4. This response causes the body to produce stress related chemicals that make the heart beat faster, our muscles to tense, and the eyes to dilate. Blood is shunted away from the midsection (including stomach)...and the mucous membranes dry up. All so you can fight harder, run faster, see better and breathe easier than you would without this response.
5. As stress is experienced over longer periods, our bodies may begin to experience high blood pressure, muscle tension, headaches, stomach upset, heartburn, ulcers, and diarrhea/constipation, which can eventually progress into issues that are more serious.
6. Serious wear and tear on the body can occur if the stress continues too long or becomes chronic. That is why chronic stress is a risk factor for heart attacks, weight gain, stroke, and diabetes. Individuals also become more prone to severe viral infections, such as the flu or common cold. It is also a risk factor in depression, anxiety, addiction and suicide.
7. Other emotional responses can include isolation or withdrawal. For example, a person may frequently miss work or not go to school or church activities they once attended.
8. Individuals who are stressed might talk in a monotone voice or have a lack of expression on the face. You could observe bursts of anger or abrasive behavior towards children or others. Worry or fearfulness about the future could become a key topic of conversation. You may notice confusion, forgetfulness or difficulty concentrating.
9. Others may respond to stress by trying to screen out unpleasant circumstances in a variety of ways. For example, some people might deny their problems. They may blame others, such as banks or their spouses. Other times, people try to escape through eating or gambling binges, spending sprees or excessive use of alcohol or other drugs. Some may sleep too much or not enough. Most of these are maladaptive attempts to cope, as a person tries to avoid dealing with the stress.
10. A person may notice a lack of pride in the way the farm building and grounds appear. Cattle or swine might not be cared for in the usual way. Accidents may occur due to fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate. Farm children may act out, decline in academic performance or be increasingly absent from school.

11. In farmers, a lack of social support, such as having few or no friends, is a predictor of depression. The person may not take care of their physical appearance or hygiene. A major concern would be if the farmer starts talking about shooting himself or herself or others. These are signs of hopelessness or depression.
12. You may be concerned about someone or a person's friend or family member, banker, veterinarian, FSA representative or elevator manager might ask you for a consultation. You could start a conversation with care and compassion by saying, "I've noticed you're feeling upset" or asking, "What's going on in your life?" Then let the person talk. Listen carefully, provide support and share personal experiences, if you feel that would be helpful. Give the person some time to express what is going on. When the person is finished and if you are concerned, be direct and ask, "Are you thinking about suicide?" If he or she says "Yes," get immediate help. Call 911 or take the individual to a hospital emergency room. If he or she says "No," ask, "What do you think might help?" or maybe "Where would you like to go for help?" Offer to make the contact together to a local resource found in a county resource directory, Iowa Concern, or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline, etc. by saying, "Why don't we make the call together?" It helps to have an awareness of or list of the resources available in your area.
13. Many things can minimize our natural stress response. Taking three slow and deep breaths, stopping to daydream or taking a short mental vacation for 10 minutes, or using repetitive prayer can help. A regular exercise program can provide break in the daily routine and is a constructive way to relieve stress. Having a strong network of friends, co-workers, and family can provide helpful support during difficult times.
14. Sometimes managing those items an individual **does** have control over can help to reduce stress, such as replacing worn parts during the off-season or setting some long-term goals. Before key seasons, discuss who can be available to run for parts or care for livestock. Set priorities about what has to be done today and what can wait. It is OK to say "No," especially to those commitments you do not have time for.
15. If stressed, first talk with someone you trust, such as friends, family or a trusted physician or minister. Taking your partner on a date helps to strengthen that very important relationship. Getting a good night's sleep, avoiding alcohol and drugs, and eating healthily help us to better manage our current stressors.

Resources

- **Iowa Concern:** 1-800-447-1985, offers 24/7 free assistance and referral for stress counseling, legal education, and financial concerns. The program began in 1985 as a toll-free number serving the agricultural community. Today, the Iowa Concern hotline serves urban as well as rural Iowa. www.extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255 (TALK), provides 24/7 free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. suicidepreventionlifeline.org
- **AnswerLine:** 1-800-262-3804, offers information related to your home and family questions. Calls are answered Monday through Friday, 9 a.m.–noon and 1–4 p.m.
- **Ask an Expert:** <http://bit.ly/ask-expert-iowa>. Submit your question online and we'll send it to someone in Extension and Outreach that can answer it. A response will be sent to your email address.
- **Dairy Farm Stress Webinar Series:** www.fourstatedairy.org/webinars.html. To help dairy farmers deal with stress, ISU Extension and Outreach hosted a series of three webinars that discussed how to recognize the signs of stress, how to deal with dairy farm families experiencing stress, analyzing a dairy for profits, the profitability of various dairy systems and what FINBIN says about production costs.

Programs

- **ELEVATE: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level:** Based on the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model (NERMEM), this program engages couples in learning and practicing seven core skills that have been found essential to maintaining healthy and stable relationships. www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/elevate
- **What About Me? My Wellbeing:** A program designed to enhance adult individual wellbeing and quality of life in ways that are personally meaningful to participants. This introductory program includes four, 45-minute sessions that cover three areas of wellbeing and how they interact. www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/wellbeing
- **Writing Your Retirement Paycheck:** A program designed to provide information needed by those approaching retirement within the next ten years. The workshop outlines key factors to consider prior to retirement and describes two strategies for structuring your retirement income. www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/retirement
- **Smart Choice: Health Insurance**
Changes in health insurance can affect your family finances! At Smart Choice: Health Insurance workshops you will learn about options and strategies for selecting a health care plan to fit your family health care needs. www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/health-insurance

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